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Has Russia now achieved its goal?

Moscow wants more than mediation — it wants recognition

Momentum is building in the efforts to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian war. But the negotiations are taking place in unexpected places and in new constellations. Rather than direct contact between Kyiv and Moscow, an agreement has initially been reached between Ukraine and the United States.

In Jeddah, the two sides agreed on the parameters of a ceasefire offer to Moscow and at the same time resolved their tensions over a raw materials deal. In response, Washington resumed its military support for Kyiv, which had been temporarily suspended — a targeted demonstration of power that highlighted Kyiv's existential dependence on the US. The European allies were hardly able to fill the gap that had arisen.

This means that Donald Trump has become a co-creator of a Russian narrative that denies Ukraine sovereignty. Marco Rubio even speaks of a proxy war — with Kyiv as the American proxy. The Kremlin had already bet between 2014 and 2022 that Washington, Paris and Berlin would force Kyiv to make concessions.

Has Russia now achieved its goal? Moscow is still unsure. In the first official reaction, the Kremlin was deliberately sober. Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary of the Russian president, said on Wednesday afternoon that Russia would carefully examine the modalities of the offer. National Security Advisor Michael Waltz then spoke on the phone with Russian presidential assistant Yuri Ushakov — the two had already established personal contact in Riyadh on 18 February. On Thursday, the plane of American real estate magnate and US special envoy Steve Witkoff landed in Moscow. Witkoff was the first high-ranking representative of the Trump administration to personally pick up the American Mark Vogel, who was imprisoned in Russia, in mid-February, and fly him out as a preliminary confidence-building measure. Wittkoff spoke with Putin on Thursday evening, and a telephone conversation between Putin and Trump could follow shortly.

An opportunity or a trap?

Putin's initial reaction indicated openness to talks. At a press conference before the conversation with Wittkoff, the Russian head of state described the 'idea' of a 30-day ceasefire as constructive. However, he immediately asked a series of counter-questions that he wanted to discuss 'with the American side' and directly with Donald Trump: The decisive question, he said, was what the next 30 days would be used for — whether, for example, Ukraine would continue its mobilisation during this time. If this does not happen, Putin asks who is supposed to monitor compliance with the agreement and whether the remaining Ukrainian soldiers near Kursk will simply surrender, since they cannot be allowed to leave 'just like that'. The ball is back in his court.

The pace is high, the American declarations of the dawning of a new era of peace are grandiose. And Trump's deal-making rhetoric has also been well received in Russia: at last, the message in Moscow is that the West is leaving its value-laden monstrance behind and getting down to business. There is hardly another country whose elite has pushed the fusion of capitalist and repressive instruments of power as far as Russia has. The nature of the Russian oligarchy has long since ceased to consist solely of the co-optation of state institutions by big capitalists; it is also about the distortion of domestic and foreign policy processes into pragmatic, often cynical business transactions.

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This allows a high stylistic and rhetorical degree of compatibility with the vision of an America dominated by 'techno bros' and governed by turbo-neoliberalism, hell-bent on quick monetary and media gains. But precisely because Washington is suddenly acting so strikingly differently, the same question arises for the Kremlin that the Europeans are also asking: Will Trump keep his word? Or might it all be a trap?

The scepticism is palpable. The war blogger and nationalist politician scene is boiling, with the ceasefire being seen as a geopolitical ruse to give Kyiv a tactical advantage. Putin must not make the same mistake as he did with previous concessions to the West in Ukraine or to Ankara in Syria. The aim is to demote Ukraine as far as possible militarily.

In fact, the dynamics on the battlefield are favourable for Moscow — interrupting them with unclear prospects for negotiations could prove to be a mistake later on. Even a one-month ceasefire could strategically harm

Russia, while giving Kyiv and its European allies valuable time to reposition themselves.

Russia's leadership does not know whether it is facing a unique window of opportunity that will only be open for a short time and could close soon, or whether it would give up its most important advantage over Ukraine by entering into substantive negotiations — the ability to continue to wear down the country.

Russia's grand strategy

Sorting out the Russian Federation's concurrent and interrelated objectives in its aggression is helped by the following three-step model.

Firstly, this is about Ukraine. Moscow has always sought to achieve a lasting 'desovereignisation' of its neighbour — in the past with more cost-efficient means such as energy blackmail, corruption, propaganda, interference in domestic politics and social division; but later – due to a lack of success – through paramilitary destabilisation and finally the large-scale invasion.

A forced regime change can be seen as an important step, but it is not an end in itself if the goal can be achieved differently — through domestic political processes in Ukraine or external pressure. However, the destruction and permanent weakening of Ukraine's military capabilities is an absolute priority. Even if parts of the Russian leadership assume that Kyiv can be forced to accept a negotiated peace, and even if the Russian economy and society are visibly looking forward to the end of the war, one thing is known: even after the annexations that have taken place, Ukraine is large and strong enough to become a very serious security problem for Russia on its own and with future European help within just a few years. Skilful border crossers, large drone fleets, a very high number of weapons and ammunition in circulation, experience with attacks and infrastructural sabotage — a post-war Ukraine will continue to be home to all of this.

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Secondly, Europe is at stake. Here, the Kremlin wants to achieve a renegotiation of the continent's rules of order. Buffer zones *vis-à-vis* NATO are to be created, the principle of non-alignment is to be dropped, the EU is to be allowed to concentrate only on economic integration, and ultimately, a revision of the Soviet consent to the final outcome of the Cold War is to be achieved. Europe is a key region in

Russia's 'grand strategy' because Russia can only claim a special role here due to geopolitical and geoeconomic factors.

From Putin's point of view, a reorganisation of Europe in this sense is imperative to correct the 'disgrace' of Gorbachev's 'dealmaking' — in line with the Congress of Vienna and the Yalta Conference. In this tradition, the Russians also point out to the Europeans that they should accept that the inviolability of borders only applied for a brief moment in history, while in the long-winded Russian perception, the borders of Europe have shifted several times in each century. In the Russian narrative, the annexation of Ukrainian territories is thus a 'normal stage in the change of Soviet borders since the 1990s — first in a shrinking direction, now in an expansive one'.

Thirdly, at the global level, Vladimir Putin wants Russia to be recognised as a major power with a regulatory role — which in turn can only be achieved through corresponding recognition by the United States. A new multipolar world should be negotiated with the equal participation of Russia — not just between Washington and Beijing. Putin sees Russia as an exceptional force that has sometimes influenced the rules of the game in world politics in a conservative and sometimes revolutionary way. In view of the rapidly ageing Russian population and a global economy that is quickly decarbonising, even in China, his efforts towards the end of his life and career in the 21st century are aimed at converting the Russian Federation's remaining power into a sustainably better position. Russia wants different rules. At the expense of Ukraine and Europe.

The only major European power

And this is the crux of Trump's foreign policy revolution. The real turning point in US-Russian relations was not Trump's election victory, but his determination that the US should be 'only a mediator' in this war. The aim is to ease the US' own obligations to Kyiv as quickly as possible in order to bring both parties to the negotiating table — not out of altruism, but to reduce the burden of US involvement in the conflict while at the same time salvaging previous 'investments' in Ukraine.

Putin responded extremely positively to Trump's interest in Ukrainian rare earths and immediately offered him joint mining projects in Ukraine — which, from Putin's point of view, would imply American acceptance of the border changes. He even held out the prospect of Russian-American joint ventures in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. This, in turn, caused irritation in patriotic circles, since the narrative of a vital defensive struggle against Western imperialism is a central component of Russian

propaganda.

But in Russia, ideology is ultimately a seasonal fashion — Putin has no difficulty switching to geopolitical business language. At last week's press conference, he himself raised the possibility of resuming gas supplies to Europe — possibly through an American-Russian consortium.

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Nevertheless, the problem lies elsewhere. Moscow does not want the US to mediate — it wants to negotiate with the US. Flirting with Trump's disarmament ideas, pressing for a rapid normalisation of air and payment traffic — all this is intended to persuade Washington to grant Russia the status of the only major European power, first informally and later in substance.

So far, Trump's mediation has given the impression that this is merely a local, post-Soviet conflict between Eastern Slavs — a kind of 'Yugoslavia 2.0'. And thus a situation in which an agreement could be reached through American diplomatic skill and well-dosed pressure on both sides.

That is not what Moscow wants. The history of Russian-Ukrainian ceasefires is full of sudden breaks. Yes, Ukraine is the minimum goal. But it is about more than that. And that is precisely why Russia will continue to play tactical games — linking the acceptance of the ceasefire to ever more concessions that could eventually lead to far-reaching European or global demands. A unilateral American rejection of Ukrainian NATO membership, a demand for demilitarised buffer zones along the NATO-Russia border or a US-Russian peace conference for the whole of Europe — all this could become a condition. And if they are not met, Russia can continue militarily until Ukraine collapses socially and politically from within. The Kursk Oblast has been de facto reconquered and the minimal goal of 'desovereignisation' would then still be achievable by costly but proven means.

It is precisely because it is not clear whether Trump can only provide Putin with selective help or whether he can become a strategic partner that Moscow wants guarantees. It may sound counterintuitive, but Russian foreign policy is not seeking to dismantle international law across the board. On the contrary, it is fixated on formalising its own gains. With BRICS, the Kremlin has been working for years on a makeshift institutional structure for a 'post-UN world'. Whether through the documented withdrawal of the Bucharest NATO admission promise or through the contractual and institutional integration of non-European

actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia or India in securing the post-war situation — Russia wants to anchor its influence in fixed structures.

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Moscow is visibly concerned about the narrow window of opportunity before the US midterm elections — it wants to create facts before the geopolitical cards are reshuffled. This is precisely why Russia is pushing for actual treaties and formal agreements. Lavrov and Putin would like nothing more than a Riyadh Congress on 'final settlement in relation to Europe'.

This geopolitical 'international law of the great powers' would cement a two-tier world — and is incompatible with the current state of Europe. Quite apart from the fact that, from a Russian point of view, the Europeans would be in the second class. A war in the middle of Europe is already being negotiated between capital cities outside the core continent, including ideas for sending non-European peacekeeping troops.

One scenario that Russia does not sufficiently take into account is the one that Ukraine, Germany and Europe recognise precisely for this reason: in a situation in which both Russia and the US are challenging the post-war order – and China, of all countries, appears as the last power to uphold the status quo – mere adherence to the old world is not enough.

A sovereign Europe capable of conducting its own foreign policy, one that can coherently formulate its own interests and underpin them with real instruments, would be a real player in the Russian and, incidentally, in the current American foreign policy conception. Moscow does not consider such a scenario to be likely. But the Kremlin is not without its errors.



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